



## The World of Carl Dreyer

Kirk Bond

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 1. (Autumn, 1965), pp. 26-38.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28196523%2919%3A1%3C26%3ATWOC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

*Film Quarterly* is currently published by University of California Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## The World of Carl Dreyer

The recent cycle of Carl Dreyer films at the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed us a Dreyer that we had no idea of, and it showed us that all in all Carl Dreyer is one of the very greatest of film-makers—that he ranks with Griffith, with Eisenstein, with Murnau, with whomever one wants to name among the moderns. We were not exactly wrong in our previous conception of his work, but lacking so much of his best work we had perforce to judge him shallowly. Once one does see the whole body of the work (and the cycle gave us all but one film) it is clear how much the latter part depends on the first part, how difficult if not impossible it is to assess his later films without knowing the earlier films. One might go further. All or nearly all of the later films are in one way or another symbolic, and we can even say that the key to them lies in the early work.

The problem at the outset in writing about Dreyer's work is the dilemma of having to choose between starting with a general analysis without the films to go by, or starting with the films themselves without having the analytical background to throw light as we go along. I have chosen to compromise and say a few general words and then plunge into the films.

I divide the films, perhaps arbitrarily, into two main groups. In the first group I put his five earliest films: *The President*, *Leaves From Satan's Book*, *The Parson's Widow*, *Love One Another*, and *Once Upon a Time*. In the second group are most of the rest: *Michael*, *The Master of the House*, *The Bride of Glomdale*, *Vampyr*, *Day of Wrath*, and *Ordet*. This leaves two in neither group: *Joan of Arc* and *Two People*. The first I put in a special class for reasons I shall go into later; the second we did not see in the cycle and so I must pass it by.

The compelling point in this division is that in the best of the films of the first group—and *only* in those—can we see Dreyer as a finished

artist, a master serenely working in complete command of his medium. All the rest—and this applies to *Joan* as well—are at least technically weakened by some ultimate lack of creative stylistic quality. Small wonder we felt Dreyer was cold! We did not know what he could do. We knew him as a struggling master, hampered somehow by what we did not know. We did not dream that he could be magnificent, luxuriant, sardonic, lyrical.

But then, when he had ceased to be the assured master he became something else, and it would be a bold critic who would say which was better. Each of the later films (except *Glomdale*, which is the one really weak Dreyer film) is a film with less or with uncertain style, but it is a film of symbolism. The idea takes precedence, and perhaps *malgré lui* Dreyer found himself using less than perfect forms to express the idea he had in mind. Deliberately or by the hand of fate something was sacrificed to get the idea out. Perhaps it could not have been otherwise.

If we had only three early films—*The President*, *Love One Another*, and *Once Upon a Time*—just these three—I would gladly say that Dreyer was a great master. And even in these, one extraordinary thing comes out. Dreyer is the most modern of all silent directors. He is a bridge between the silent Golden Age of which he was a part and the present day of which, of course, he is also a part. And I mean a bridge creatively, not just chronologically. For a moment in *The President* (1920) we see a new experimental film made yesterday. In his next films he seems to be straining at the leash, trying to push film art far ahead of his contemporaries, advanced though they themselves might be.

And in his symbolic films time disappears and we are already in the world of Bergman, of Resnais. Discovering Dreyer is like discovering La Tour, Herman Melville, El Greco. We

THE  
PRESIDENT



thought we knew him, the rather cold, rather narrow, though admittedly intense master—the creator of *Joan of Arc*, the familiar milestone of film history. Then we find we did not know him at all. We find that he is a great silent master for reasons we had not imagined, and more amazingly we find that he is in a unique sense a modern director; that while the work of others lives as great art Dreyer's work lives as the work of today. He is a contemporary, and what he has to say might be said by film-makers today.

With these few words we may go into the films themselves. I cannot think of more than two or three first films that compare with *The President*. Perhaps none quite equals it in maturity and finished style. *Strike* is more ebullient, *Citizen Kane* is more ambitious, but neither has the polish of *The President*. *Pather Panchali* comes closest possibly. But I still think Dreyer's film has the edge.

The story is not remarkable. It is essentially a typical nineteenth-century melodrama. A judge (with the official title of "President"—of the court) has an illegitimate daughter who is put on trial for killing her infant child. She is condemned to death, and the President first helps her to escape from prison and marry the man she loves and then kills himself. What mat-

ters is what Dreyer does with this material.

Here at a single stroke Dreyer creates a new filmic world like no other we have ever known. He owes much, obviously, to Griffith. There is the Griffith cutting, the Griffith imagery, the Griffith handling of people. But Griffith is only a beginning.

The most immediately apparent, most obvious quality that one sees at a first viewing is the amazing decor and the use Dreyer makes of it. According to Neergaard he was on this film his own set designer. The result is close to the decor of *Joan*, but because it is in the literal sense more realistic it finally seems even more effective. In *Joan* it becomes an end in itself. In *The President* it is an element in the overall pattern and it speaks as a part of the drama.

There are the bare white walls, walls broken by decorative objects, solid, isolated like gems in a case. And these objects may form ornate patterns themselves on the white walls. At one point an old servant sits tranquilly sipping tea while four medium-sized spoons, bowls outward, form a sort of spiked crown around his head. At another point a sofa stands against a wall on which a number of small medallions or miniatures—forty or fifty of them—form an intricate pattern.

There are the bare wooden floors, gleaming like polished ivory. There is a simple kitchen scene of white walls, white steps, bare floors—it might come out of the work of a Sienese master. There is a Griffith-like scene of the couple on a small wooden bridge in a landscape. But the combination of the bright white boards of the bridge and the surrounding shrubbery give us again the haunting semi-abstract quality of all this Dreyer decor.

Another word for it is "pure." Almost from the start of the cycle this word above all kept ringing in my ears. I felt Dreyer was a *pure* artist in a sense I could hardly define. Blake might make an inept comparison; the two artists are after all very different. The pure artist is apt to run himself into the ground of inanity, too, but Dreyer assuredly never does that. He preserves with his purity of form and idea a humanity on the one hand and a depth on the other.

Still on the visual side two outstanding bits in the film must be mentioned. Toward the end of the film, when the President and his daughter are travelling by different routes to an appointed meeting-place suddenly there is a shot, practically in silhouette, of a giant signal-tower and the signal arm lifting or falling, then a quick shot of a train viaduct with a carriage racing underneath. We could be watching a new experimental film.

More dazzling is the sequence of the torch-light procession. It must be one of the great visual moments in all film history. On a completely dark screen two tiny bits of light appear, at the two sides of the screen. They grow, and as they grow we see two groups of people moving toward us bearing torches. The images grow larger and we see that they are advancing toward the camera down two streets that meet at the center before us. The groups merge, now covering most of the screen, and then there is a series of other shots of people with torches, moving one way then another like grass moved by the wind. Finally the people reach a central square and toss their torches into a single flaming pile.

It has the effect of the torches in the religious

procession in *El Dorado*, but if L'Herbier is more delicate, Dreyer is more overwhelming. The scene is close, at the least, to Lang's tremendous shot of the burning hall of the Huns in *Kriemhild's Revenge*.

I have the feeling in this film especially of something more than real, of something that never was on land or sea. It is not fantasy in the conventional sense. It is reality, but reality filtered through some strange glass that makes the simplest scene at once human and natural and yet unearthly.

And at one point at least Dreyer breaks completely with reality and introduces fantasy so pure, so transcendent that it leaves me gasping. In one of several flashbacks the daughter is about to be thrown out by her employer because of having the child. There is no business of preparations for leaving—she must go immediately. At the door she pauses and looks back longingly. The camera pans over to a corner of the room in which there is absolutely nothing but bare walls and, in the very corner on the floor, two shoes neatly placed side by side. Then the camera pans back, the employer roughly shakes her head, and the girl goes forlornly out the door. In its exquisite symbolism it makes me think of some recent Polish experimental films.

Dreyer's next two films do not seem to me at all comparable to this. We have known *Satan's Book* for years. It still seems inordinately heavy and stiff, though of course showing the same feeling for stylized decor. Presumably with Griffith in mind he wanted to make his own *Intolerance*. At any rate the idea of a phases-of-history film was very much in the air at the time. Murnau was making *Satanas*, May *Veritas Vincit*, and Tourneur *Woman*. But this does not explain why Dreyer chose such a poor story as the illogical idea of Marie Corelli (which Griffith found he could do little with years later) or why he wound up with such a weak production. Even the "modern" or Finnish story, which some people like, strikes me as decidedly inferior. We accept the film as Dreyer, but it is hard to be enthusiastic about it.

*The Parson's Widow* presents other problems.

## DREYER

Personally I do not find much in it. To me it is no more than a pleasant, minor Swedish film with little to mark it as Dreyer. But it seems to be one of the hits of the cycle. I grant that it tells an appealing story of the old lady and the young couple who came to feel contrite about their scorn of the old lady, and the old actress Hildur Carlberg is effective in a strong part, but these things do not seem to me to make a really good film, and certainly no masterpiece.

The one important thing in the film is the theme itself, and I can best explain that when I come to the symbolic films. It is more or less the theme that dominates Dreyer's later films, but here still simply a dramatic theme, not a symbolic theme, and so of little importance in this elementary form.

With *Love One Another* we are back in the world of the master. It is very different from *The President*. It is on a broader scale, with politics, religion, and history all playing parts. It does not have the special decor of *The President*—it is on a much more realistic plane. But by the same token it leads us in another direction. It reminds us of Pabst, and then as we watch it suddenly seems to take us to the Russians. And still it is Dreyer. No one else could have made it.

Again the story is not exactly original, though it is a better story than that of *The President*. It is a complicated story of ghetto Jews in old Russia somewhere around 1900. A provincial Jewish girl flees to St. Petersburg and joins the revolutionary movement. She is found out and forced to return to her village. Here there is a pogrom and she is rescued by her lover who has come from St. Petersburg.

The resemblance to the Pabst of *Jeanne Ney*, the Pabst of trains and great cities and surging crowds, is evident. Even more striking is the resemblance to the great Russian films which, like Pabst's, were yet to come.

Still no doubt thinking of Griffith, Dreyer here cuts with an abandon that goes beyond the occasional bravura sequence of a *La Roue* with its train ride. Dreyer's cutting is for long stretches veritable *montage*—in the old sense. This is particularly true, of course, of the po-



THE PARSON'S WIDOW

grom. One could almost be watching Pudovkin.

And what Dreyer cuts in this brilliant style is as peculiarly Russian as the cutting itself. The priests with their ikons look forward to *Potemkin* and may indeed have influenced Eisenstein. Someone dies on a street corner, the same anonymous figure of so many Russian films. There is actually a shot of a woman in a rocking chair—an image we would have said was exclusively Russian.

In the scenes of the revolutionary group the feeling is still stronger. The shabby room, the intense faces, the general air of idealistic yet practical devotion, the one girl with the lean, serious face—all this is Russian film, years before it had come to flower.

But here there is something a Russian film would not have—something solely Dreyer. As they begin drawing lots to see who will have the honor of throwing the first bomb, a young man with a poet's face stands up and volunteers.

The others press around him admiringly, and then—with a sidelong glance at Griffith we might say—the girl comes up to him at the edge of the screen, takes his head in her hands, bends it down, and kisses him on the forehead. This is the purity of Dreyer, that serenity that has no equal on the screen.

There is also Dreyer in the wonderful drawn-out scene of the spy at the party. It is largely a matter of bold closeups of two people: the girl's brother who recognizes the spy from the past and the spy who realizes he is recognized. It is done with glances so beautifully modulated and refined we hold our breath.

And in a very different direction there is the scene of the spy dressed as a monk coming to the curious hillside hovel of another villager. Here is a touch of the fantasy of *The President* and also a touch of the mysticism of Dovzhenko. One merges into the other. The scene is literally realistic, but with Dreyer it is never easy. Dreyer does not underline his ideas. He does not tell us what he is doing. That is for us to find out. We may guess wrong, but even there the very terms seem inadequate. It is not a matter of right or wrong, he may say. You see, and that is enough.

By now Dreyer had made four films, two brilliantly successful, one nice but slight, one ambitious but stiff. Returning from Germany where he had shot *Love One Another*, fully in command of his medium (if he had in some slight degree not been before), he began a film which may very well be his masterpiece, which at the very least is certainly enormously fascinating, and which at the same time is the great mystery of his career—*Once Upon a Time*.

According to the Museum of Modern Art a print of this film was recently discovered by the Danish Film Museum. As shown in the Museum cycle it is in what the Museum calls "fragmentary form." But this hardly begins to describe the curious print actually screened at the Museum.

What we saw runs about fifty minutes and is divided roughly into three parts: an opening coherent section in which a Prince courts a neighboring Princess, is rebuffed, then returns

disguised as a tinker; a closing coherent section in which the Prince and Princess, both poorly dressed, live in the forest making pottery; and a middle section which is a confused jumble including two and even three takes of the same scene. Some of the middle section can be called cut, but more of it seems to be simply raw footage that had never been edited.

This is not all. The film is taken from Holger Drachmann's play of the same title. When we go back to the play we find that the two more or less finished sections of the film correspond roughly to the first two-thirds of the play. What is missing in this part is the scene in which the Princess, having permitted the tinker to visit her, is discovered by her father the King, and both Prince and Princess are turned out of the palace.

So far so good. But the play then goes on to have the Princess return to the palace and work as a kitchen maid, the Prince to come and reveal himself in his true identity, and so all to end happily with a proper wedding. Bits of this occur in the middle section of the film, along with other bits that do not readily find a place in the play at all.

The strange and haunting thing about it is that the two coherent sections of the film are superb, but the confused middle section, with one notable exception, is not especially distinguished.

The film opened in Copenhagen in October, 1922, and in Stockholm several weeks later. I have checked the latter opening, and there was nothing unusual about it. It played the usual one week, received conventional praise—"a pleasure to recommend this charming fairy tale for old and young"—and was presumably of customary feature length. If Dreyer did indeed direct the whole film, how on earth could a print such as this come into existence? But for that matter there remains the baffling puzzle of how *any* film print could combine large cut sections, beautifully made, and raw footage, for the most part of inferior quality. Perhaps further research in Denmark will clarify these problems.

But all this says nothing about the film. I have given the story, and yet I have not given

the story. Everything about this film is fantastic, incredible. The one thing it most certainly is *not* is a "simple fairy tale." It is at once a legend on the grand scale of *The Nibelungen*, a whimsical, tongue-in-cheek comedy in the Lubitsch manner (which was still then in the course of development), and a story so close to the Griffith of *Isn't Life Wonderful* (two full years later) that we feel Griffith must have seen the film. At one extreme there is a scene that has all of the stately epic beauty of the Italian *Odyssey*, at the other extreme there are shots that could come right out of *The Virgin Spring*. It is, even in its present small, dismantled form, a veritable history of film, and to anyone with a feeling for creative film it is an overpowering experience.

It has the Dreyer decor in its early part to perfection. I like particularly the little scene of the missing parrot. The parrot is a variegated element, colorful and feathery. But first we see the empty bird-stand, a hard, rigid thing of absolutely straight lines, and then we see the parrot wandering up some steps, steps clear and straight as in any abstract painting.

A sort of variation on the decor is the scene of the Prince's serenade, a wonderful sequence in which the Prince sits in a great barge playing a small harp. At one point the barge goes by the camera while in the background in the water is a line of rocks. This is the scene that goes back to *The Odyssey*, with the latter's echoes of an epic past.

Yet mostly the early part is really rather rococo in general feeling and style. The period is late eighteenth-century and the tone is one of civilized banter. Voltaire might have written it. Still Voltaire would hardly have put in the marvellous scene of Clara Pontoppidan as the Princess bargaining with the disguised Prince for the magic teakettle. She had already given him a kiss for the magic rattle—now she is ready to give him another kiss for the kettle. No? What then? Oh! So she goes off in a huff with her head in the air, and all the pretty serving-maids go off in a huff with their heads in the air, and then only a few moments later the Princess steals out alone with a key for the tinker.

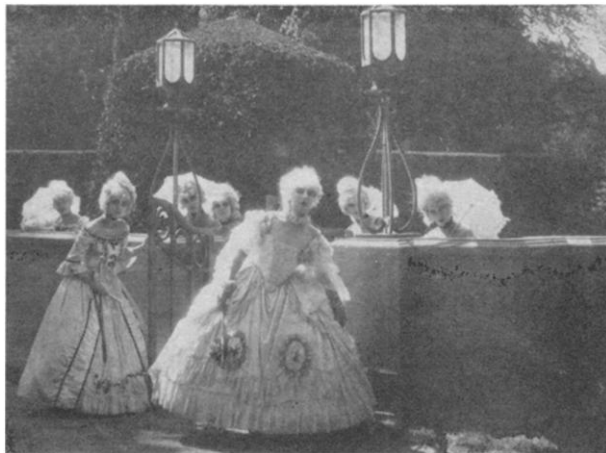
ONCE UPON A TIME

The teakettle brings us back to the soaring epic imagery of the film. For the Prince obtains the rattle and the kettle from an ugly old man in the forest who disappears in thin air when the Prince would question him. Here is Alberic of *The Nibelungen* and perhaps more. The scene recalls not only Lang but the Dovzhenko of *Zvenigora*.

And as part of the forest milieu we have the tremendous shot of the great forest, the huge trees, the sunlight pouring through them as in Sucksdorff, and down in the corner the Princess coming along a diagonal of road toward the camera. The old trick of one small displaced figure against the main composition comes off brilliantly and shows again Dreyer's protean quality.

But the long forest section proper is more Griffith than anyone else, and is, I suspect, the key to the whole film. The Prince and the Princess live in a clearing where they are busy making pots. The bulk of the section deals in fact with the trip the Princess makes with a wheelbarrow full of pottery ostensibly to sell (in the play she takes the pottery to the city). She comes across some vagabonds who try to seize her. She escapes but the pots have been broken. She piles the remains in the barrow and wheels it back home.

She has barely returned when foresters come hunting for the Prince, who has killed a bear. He hides, they go away, and the Prince and Princess embrace at what is for this print the end of the film.



The resemblance to the loss of the potatoes in *Isn't Life Wonderful* is striking. And the ending of this section certainly seems to have much the same value as the ending of Griffith's film: though the pottery or potatoes are gone we have each other.

But there is another point which is peculiar to Dreyer. All this later material, the forest milieu in general, is not eighteenth-century, but medieval. The Prince has a crossbow, and there are in fact no signs of any settlement. Dreyer has plucked his characters out of the over-civilized age of reason and set them down in the dawn period of a culture.

So—if we consider only these sections of the film we have—the film is to a point symbolic. First there is the high comedy of the rococo world, then the visual grandeur of the forest (and the sea if we count the serenade interlude), then the simplicity of the Middle Ages. We go backward in time to find a new life, a new world.

But at this rate we are on the verge of the later Dreyer, the Dreyer of the symbolic films, the Dreyer who is, in film after film, talking about a new life, as are, I believe, Bergman, Antonioni, and Resnais.

Of course, if, after all, Dreyer really shot his film closely adhering to the Drachmann play and wound up with a typical fairy-tale ending (the Prince marrying the Princess with due ceremony), then there isn't much to my theory about this film. But I find it hard to believe that this film, with its marvellous material, its great scenes that can compare with the best in film history, did not represent to Dreyer more than a pretty fairy story. It just does not seem natural for an artist to pour so much strength into a minor potboiler.

Finally I must emphasize the anachronistic aspect of *Once Upon a Time*. Here there is the beautiful, graceful blending of rococo and medieval. In *Joan of Arc* there are the Sam Browne belts and the trench helmets in the fifteenth century. Again in *Michael* there is a curious blend of the contemporary world of short skirts and wrist watches and the *fin-de-siecle* world of ateliers and carriages. In *Vampyr* the vampire

dresses in the seventeenth-century way while the story is modern. Period authenticity means nothing to Dreyer. He is a poet, and it suits him at times to mix historical ages and show his characters *sub specie aeternitatis*.

With *Michael* we come to the first of the symbolic films. And it seems essential to consider at the outset the main theme as I have followed it through the various films.

This theme I call the Death of the Master. It is in fact a retelling of the story of The Golden Bough: the story of the death of the god. The Master, like the god, grows old, impotent, and dies, to be succeeded by a new, young master who continues the life and work of the race. In some of Dreyer's films the Master is killed, just as the god is killed, to make way for the new. In others he dies more or less naturally.

The whole story exists in one form in *The Parson's Widow*, though as I have said in this film the story is realistic, not symbolic. Still the elements are all there. The young couple—the young man who is forced to marry the aged lady in order to become the new parson, and his sweetheart—rather cold-bloodedly band together against the old lady, and the young man plots to kill her. The plot misfires and it is the girl who is injured. The old lady then gives in to the love of the couple and obligingly dies voluntarily, leaving the couple contrite but free.

*Michael*, like *Love One Another*, was shot in Germany. On the surface it is a film made from a novel by Herman Bang, a film about an old artist and a young artist with a good deal of nineteenth-century fustian in it. It is a story that calls out for aspidistras and smoking jackets. Finally the old man dies and the ungrateful young man, even as the old man dies, is in the arms of his mistress. Supposedly based on the life of Rodin, the story verges on *kitsch*.

Nor does it seem a particularly interesting film, visually speaking. Some seem to feel it has "German" qualities. I know something of the qualities of the films of the German Golden Age, and I must say I see little of them here. The sets are rather conventional, the lighting mildly interesting—until you think of the great lighting in so many German films. The film jogs



## DREYER

along a bit stiffly, never downright bad, but never very good. It seldom if ever, either in imagery or cutting, reminds us of Dreyer, and only at the end can we say that it has a bit of good work in the sequence of the Master's friend coming to tell the young artist of the Master's death.

But seen symbolically *Michael* is something else again. Its very first title is "In the house of the master." With this we see the old-world atelier of the Master, its walls covered with canvases in the mid-nineteenth century fashion. We see the ancient major-domo with his antique livery and his flowing beard. Then, as the film progresses, we see the counterpoint of the noble old artist and his model and protégé who chafes at the protection and at the subordinate role that is required of him. We see the young man living in the present day (1924), we see him declare his independence. Then at the end the Master dies, with no one beside him but an old friend and the old servant, and the young man hears the news in the arms of his mistress. Briefly the young man stirs uneasily, but the girl soothes him, and he sinks back in her arms.

Here in effect is the couple of *The Parson's Widow*. The young man has not literally tried to kill the old man, but in a subtler sense he has done so, with the aid and comfort of the girl. And whereas we may find the last scene slightly absurd as realistic drama, from the symbolic point of view it is very moving. The young man, still not without affection for the old man, has a twinge of conscience. The old life—the life against which he rebelled—still has meaning for him, and he looks back a little guiltily.

But the girl pulls him back to his present reality. And the point is that this reality *is* the new world, the real world. The old world, the world of the Master and all that he represents, is now a false world, a world that would crush the young artist and prevent him from living a normal life. The girl, with the clairvoyance of women, sees this as the artist does not, and it is she who finally persuades him of the wisdom of accepting the "new" life.

For his next film Dreyer returned to Denmark and made *The Master of the House*, as it is



MICHAEL

called generally in English. This title is unfortunate, since the proper translation is *Thou Shalt Honor Thy Wife*. That is, the immediate suggestion of the Master in the former title is not present in the original title. And the film does not conform very closely to the theme of the Master.

It is a curious, rather moving film that follows a theme dear to the hearts of nineteenth-century writers from Dickens on—the theme of the revoltingly harsh creature who in the end reforms and becomes a human being. Beautifully acted, beautifully photographed, beautifully salted with homely little touches of everyday life in a simple, middle-class apartment, it is delightful without being coy, warm without being suffo-

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE



cating. I do wonder, though, whether it is much of a film. The great bulk of it takes place in the small apartment, and it has a certain theatrical quality about it. It is more recognizably Dreyer than *Michael*. Its cool rooms with all sorts of odds and ends on the walls are not too far from the rooms of *The President*. But it is not *The President* by any means. It is essentially realistic, and its filmic style is correct but literal.

But even if we cannot say it is definitely in the pattern of the Master theme, it will bear examination. We still have the Master—a rather oldish and difficult *pater familias*—and we still have a sort of conspiracy against him. The conspiracy, indeed, succeeds brilliantly, and though the man lives the original Master disappears. Is it too fanciful to see in this a variant of the theme? We might at least keep it in mind.

Dreyer followed this film with one made in Norway, *The Bride of Glomdale*. It has a few nice landscapes, but on the whole it is a weak film, presumably shot to order, a heavy-handed Romeo and Juliet sort of thing that is none the better for having some very obvious Griffith cutting injected into the *Way Down East* climax on the river.

After this came France and *Joan of Arc*. But since I see *Joan* as different from all other Dreyers I shall postpone discussion of that and go directly to *Vampyr*.

To say that *Vampyr* is the most confusing of the Dreyer films would be an understatement. It might well be the most confusing of all films. So I want to give a fairly detailed summary of it.

As the story opens a young man with fishing equipment arrives toward evening at a tiny country inn by a river. He takes a room and after he has retired an old man in a dressing gown comes in, puts down a package, says "She must not die!" and leaves. Unnerved by this the young man goes outside and walks around the neighborhood. He finds a dilapidated house where he meets a strange, fierce man who seems to be a doctor of some sort, sees an even stranger old woman in an antique costume, and watches some shadows dancing on a wall with nothing to cast them. There is also a fellow with a wooden leg in a semimilitary costume with a gun. The young man presently comes to a chateau just as the man in the dressing gown—the master of the chateau—is killed, apparently by the man with the gun.

The master of the chateau leaves two daughters, one seriously ill from some dreadful trouble. The young man stays in the chateau to help the daughters. Gradually it becomes clear that the sick daughter is suffering from attacks by a vampire who is in fact the old lady in the old house. It also becomes clear that the doctor is actually her assistant. The doctor persuades the young man to give his blood for blood the ill daughter has lost, and while the young man is resting the doctor gets the other daughter out of the chateau and imprisoned in the old house. Presently the young man rouses, he and an old servant go into the graveyard and drive a spike through the heart of the vampire, and the young man rescues the captive daughter. With the real death of the vampire the ill daughter rises up in bed as though a great weight had been lifted from her. The man with the gun falls down a flight of steps and dies; the doctor dies also, suffocating horribly in a nearby flour mill. And the young man and the rescued daughter walk through a wood and emerge as the sunlight is beginning to flood the scene.

This is the main outline. It does not include the "vision" of the burial of a man seen by the young man as he sits on a bench in the garden, or the episode of the dead coachman, or the repeated scenes of the young man reading a



THE BRIDE OF GLOMDALE

## DREYER

book about vampires through which the audience is kept informed about some of the aspects of the film.

It is, of course, a famous if not very familiar film. My own feelings toward it are mixed. I like it—perhaps I should say I am fascinated by it, which is not necessarily the same thing. But I do not feel it is really a major film. It is—as is not very commonly realized—made up of two parts. It has on the one hand a succession of magnificent visual passages in a style virtually unique. But then after these purple passages it turns to a style that is hardly more than commonplace.

And I do not feel that it is an ordinary instance of alternating high and low key work. The two elements are too different, the change from exciting visual imagery to rather routine imagery is too great.

In any event I do not feel that even the purple passages are wholly satisfactory. One may ask, I think, what has Dreyer done with them? They seem to me to be fine things in themselves, but not parts of a creative whole. In other words Dreyer has with them shown what can be done in a new way on the screen, but he has not actually done it. His imagery remains the experimental work of the studio, not the work of a finished film.

It may be said that the film is such that the good imagery together with the ordinary imagery gives the whole film an atmospheric quality that succeeds, unusual though it may be. I can only say that it does not seem so to me. To me the two parts do not fuse, and I am left with a sense of contrivance, of something artificial.

Indeed the film seems to me a sort of Castle of Otranto on a grander scale. I would not place it with *Nosferatu* or the two classic versions of *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Epstein and Watson and Webber). And it does not help that I seem to see a number of bits thrown in for effect, as though the film could not stand on its own feet.

Still, who can resist the appeal of the great things that Dreyer has poured into it? The



VAMPIR

shadows, the high shot of the vampire on the floor of the great barnlike structure with the dislocated wheels in the air like mobiles, the haunting scenes on a spectral-like lawn, the killing of the vampire, even the merely bizarre scenes of the doctor with his Mark Twain cigar. The film may come apart as a film, but in its ruins there are flashes of lightning.

As for symbolism it obviously follows the theme of the Master to a degree. There is, of course, the actual master of the chateau, but he is a relatively subordinate character. The story revolves around the evil and ancient vampire, her death, and the release and promise of new life for the three young people involved. In this film it is made clear that the vampire was in her lifetime a cruel, evil person, so that to this extent the story departs from the pattern. But the film is close enough: the Master, a pernicious influence, is killed, and a new life begins.

Eleven years went by before Dreyer made another film. Then, in the midst of war, came *Day of Wrath*, a film that went back to the



DAY OF WRATH

period and even the story of *The Parson's Widow*. It is, unfortunately, generally referred to as a story of religious persecution and witchcraft, which may well lead people to expect something along the line of Christensen's *Hexen*. But it is essentially a personal drama, with the larger issues forming background rather than foreground.

It is indeed almost a new version of *The Parson's Widow*, albeit with great changes of detail and approach. It is somber not light, and much of the story is new, but still there is the basic situation of the old Master and the young couple, one of them married to the Master.

As a film its most interesting aspect is its use of the same brilliant style, involving bold lighting and (for the hard, precise Dreyer) a revolutionary soft photography, which we also find in *Vampyr*. But here it is considerably toned down. On the other hand the film as a whole is unified, and so succeeds as a whole better than *Vampyr*.

But it has the faults of its period. Coming in the long theatrical stretch between two creative periods it is good by the standard of its time, less good by the standards of the silent age or the present age. It lacks the old silent brio that, however transformed, is still present in *Vampyr*, and it comes too soon to have the deeper quality of later films.

It is still, however, most interesting from the symbolic point of view. The girl has married a much older man and when his grown son returns from a visit she is attracted to him. She reaches the point of wishing her husband dead. Then, when the husband does die naturally the wife is accused of his murder. The son promises to stand by the girl, not knowing, however, that she has also been accused of witchcraft. When this does come out the son recoils in horror and turns against the girl like everyone else. And at this desertion by the world the girl proclaims that she is indeed guilty as they say.

The story lacks the ingredient of the new life. The world is dark at the end of the film. Does it perhaps mirror Dreyer's own doubts in a time when the real world was dark and the immediate future threatening? However this

may be, the earlier part of the film clearly follows the pattern. There is indeed just enough ambiguity about the reality of witchcraft to lend further point to the matter of the girl's wishing her husband dead. And symbolically this fills out the pattern on this score.

Soon after *Day of Wrath* came the one film we have not seen—*Two People*. Regretfully I must pass it by.

Then after another decade came *Ordet*. It is not an easy film. In some ways it can be criticized as a rather unsuccessful film. But I suppose that on the whole, with all its superficially literal quality and its very leisurely pace, it is the finest of Dreyer's symbolic films after *Joan*. And, after all, here is Dreyer, the Dreyer who long before had anticipated the ideas and even the style of the new filmic age, making a film himself in this new age he had at least helped to bring about. It would be only fitting that he produce a remarkable work.

Stylistically it is the old Dreyer of *The Master of the House*, firm, clear, matter-of-fact, rather than the mystical impressionist of *Vampyr* and *Day of Wrath*. In its concentration on the interiors of the farm house it takes us back to the interiors of *The Master of the House*. It has a few of the old decor tricks, but not many. The shots are long, and the life of what is mostly one long day is given in full, careful detail. But it is not dull. It is a fascinating film, one which sticks in the mind, from the haunting voice of Johannes to the innumerable little bits of daily life that flow about the main events. Slow perhaps, it is still definitely creative.

But above all is its symbolism. I do not know Kaj Munk's play. I gather it is an earnest religious drama. But Dreyer's film is far more than religious. Here is a sort of culmination of the thread of symbolic truth that Dreyer had been following ever since *Michael*, a generation earlier. Not that Dreyer is particularly clear about it. But he has said more here, and he seems to have reached more definite conclusions.

The film deals essentially with one family in a rural district. There are the old grandfather, his three sons of widely varying ages, and the wife and two daughters of the eldest son.

Johannes, the second son, has lost his mind and is a harmless but trying fellow who—at times at least—thinks he is Christ. He preaches to no one in the open fields and calls on anyone who will listen to repent for not believing in him.

The film in fact revolves around Johannes, the madman, even though he may sometimes be subordinated to other action. The rest of the play is the workaday world—much the same contrast we get in *Through a Glass Darkly*, it might be noticed. The people go about their routine tasks, hold their discussions on life, as they have always done, and Johannes drifts through this familiar society like a lost soul, calling out in a plaintive, almost a chanting voice for the lost world to turn to him and be saved.

The wife is about to have a baby. While she is confined Johannes wanders into the bedroom, staggers, and falls against the bed. The others put him in his room and return to their more urgent work. Presently the wife dies in childbirth, and no one gives much thought to Johannes.

The funeral is held, and as the services are about to begin Johannes appears—in his right mind. Still, however, Johannes feels that there is a lack of faith, and now one of the small daughters tells her uncle—there had always been a special bond between them—that she is sure he can call her mother back to life. And this is what he does.

So the Christ figure appears and performs a miracle. But this is not really the point. There have been many Christ figures who have worked miracles. Not always physical ones, but certainly spiritual ones, such as those in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*. If this were the whole film we should be disappointed. But it is not.

The point of this shining story is that it is not Johannes the mad man who performs the miracle, but Johannes the *sane* man. He is *not* Christ or anything like it. He is simply an intelligent, sensitive human being who feels the harshness of the world.

And now we can see the function of the miracle in perspective. Johannes the madman is

not really Christ and since he is not his whole Christ-like performance is only just that, a performance. It has no meaning. Anyone can think he is Christ. Of course Johannes is utterly sincere, but this does not change things. He can do nothing good or sensible except in small ways, and certainly he cannot work miracles.

But the strong, vigorous man he becomes can work miracles! In other words the Master—this time a sort of god in truth though only an imaginary one—dies and in his place is a man who in his first vital act performs a real miracle.

And there is perhaps another point. If, as I think he does, Dreyer has in mind the world of today, the idea of the miracle is—symbolically—very reasonable. If we are in a state as bad as we often think, we *need* a miracle. Nothing less will do to remedy matters. So Dreyer says it will occur. The Master—old here in spirit if not in years—will die and be succeeded by someone young and capable who will perform the miracle.

I do not think that fantastic. I think we must listen to Dreyer. We too must believe in his hope and his miracle. For then it may happen.

I would like to make one more point about *Ordet*. It sheds a good deal of light on Bergman's most baffling film, *The Magician*. It can hardly be a coincidence that the Magician obtains his miracle—not by his own effort, to be sure—*after* he has put aside his beard, the beard which presents a false Christ-like solemnity deliberately even as Johannes does innocently. I don't suppose we would be justified in going too far with this parallel, but seen in this light I think *The Magician* is easier to follow.

And now what of *Joan*? I have called it a symbolic film but put it in a class by itself. It is, of course, Dreyer's most famous film, indeed one of the world's most celebrated films. Still I have said that it is not wholly satisfactory. I have indicated that it does not compare with the best films of his early period. All this calls for explanation.

In style it is certainly impressive. Much more than any of the three preceding films it has a firm style, and a style that is indubitably Dreyer. Here Dreyer has gathered together the decor,



ORDET

the imagery, the cutting, the serene purity of his early masterpieces and has produced a splendid symphony that remains unequaled, unapproached. Small wonder it has had since its first appearance a great reputation.

But I question whether this is all. We speak of the style of the film, but in reality there are *three* styles. For the first third or more of the film there is almost nothing but the trial itself. We see, over and over, close-ups and medium shots and a few long shots, and there is little to be called real imagery. The emphasis is almost entirely upon the people, and the continuity becomes a simple matter of turning from one shot to another without much structural organization.

Then as the scene shifts to the outdoors the style becomes more varied, more creative, more fluid. Finally with the actual burning the film suddenly breaks into a dazzling crescendo of shots that goes on until the end.

I feel that the early section, noble and in ways moving as it is, lacks real warmth. It is a series of tableaux rather than a film. And I feel too that there is a certain remoteness in

---

---

## DREYER

these portraits of a suffering girl, many evil men, and a few good but helpless men. They go through the motions of the play, but they do not live. They do not avoid even a certain banality in the stereotyped gestures and expressions that are used.

The middle portion is much better, but even here I feel a stiffness. Everything seems all too carefully calculated. It is well done, but it does not soar. The purity has become all too pure, and we look in vain for a creative flash.

Then, with Joan already at the stake, the film at last comes to life. The flames go up, the crowd moves, and the soldiers take steps to control the crowd. The camera darts about, catching things like the flails hurled down from a tower, the crowd pours by with the old vigor of *Love One Another*, the cannon is wheeled into place, we are watching a different film. In this last reel or so the Master is once more really at work, and this last part of *Joan* belongs with the early great films.

But why is *Joan* down here at the end, all by itself? It seems clear that the symbolism of the film is at least distantly related to the main theme of the Master. It is the Passion story, and of course there is the death and the gain for the world. Dreyer might well be pardoned for stretching his theme to take in the old story of Joan of Arc.

Yet I wonder. Dreyer specifically emphasizes the *passion* of Joan—in virtually every shot of her, her eyes are filled with tears. She is a far cry from the Shavian heroine of *St. Joan*, much less the brilliant, headstrong girl I see as the historical Joan.

I cannot help feeling that this is a personal confession. After the debacle of *Once Upon a Time*, after the surely less than satisfactory *Michael* and *The Master of the House*, after the unfortunate *Glomdale*, it would not seem unfitting. It is not something to dwell on. But we can make our own impersonal comment. It would be irony of the purest hue if that film which was a cry from the depths against the world were blandly, eagerly accepted by that same world as a "great work of art."